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TAGS: PREL PBTS XF MO
SUBJECT: MOROCCO CAUTIOUSLY SUPPORTS PRESIDENT'S MIDDLE EAST PEACE INITIATIVE

Classified By: Polcouns Craig Karp for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Speaking after the July 30 Arab League meeting, Moroccan Foreign Minister Mohammed Benaissa expressed support for President Bush's July 16 Middle East peace initiative. "We detected several positive elements in the recent speech of the U.S. president on the Palestinian issue which, we hope, will result in holding an international conference that will lead to mapping out a new blueprint aimed at ending the Middle East conflict," said Benaissa. This appears a slightly more forward leaning response than that voiced by the Arab League in response to the President's proposal.

¶2. (C) Polcouns met with Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General Azeroual on August 2 to seek elaboration of Morocco's position. Azeroual echoed Benaissa's statement of support for the Bush proposal. Speaking personally, Azeroual said several times he felt strongly that the time was right for such a meeting, and that partners on all sides were ready to negotiate. The Arabs were ready, even the Syrians, and Azeroual echoed the Arab League's assertion that Syria must participate. Syria had tried to scuttle the League's discussion of the Arab Peace Initiative and the President's proposal but had been forced to back down. The Israelis, especially Prime Minister Olmert, appeared ready, although he did not expect Likkud was ready, adding that Likkud did not appear at present to have enough votes to disrupt progress. He urged caution, however, hoping that lessons could be learned from past unsuccessful efforts, specifically mentioning past conferences at Madrid and Sharm El-Sheikh. The conflict must first be resolved from within the Palestinian Authority, he said. Recognizing that Abu Mazen's hold on power is tenuous and that Hamas and Fatah do not represent the whole of Palestinian society, it is important to broaden the Palestinian base before the peace process can move ahead.

¶3. (C) Azeroual underscored that the GOM remained in close contact with Israel and confirmed what we had previously heard that Morocco had sent representatives both royal (Counselor Andre Azoulay) and government (Ambassador Serge Berdugo) to Israeli President Shimon Peres' swearing-in ceremony in mid-July. Azeroual called Peres a "long-time friend," referring to then-Prime Minister Peres' 1986 visit to King Hassan II's palace in Ifrane.

¶4. (C) Azeroual claimed he had heard that Olmert had told Secretary Rice that he wanted the participation of both Saudi

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Arabia and Morocco in the conference. Paraphrasing a centuries-old Arab proverb, he said, "If you want to get to Palestine, you have to first pass by the two royal capitals, Riyadh and Rabat." He reiterated Morocco's longstanding desire to participate in the conference/meeting and efforts

to advance Middle East peace in general.

¶5. (C) Comment: Azeroual, an MFA U/S equivalent responsible for the Arab and Islamic countries, is widely experienced in the region. He will be in New York for the UNGA. In addition to any planned bilateral discussions on issues such as Sahara or regional affairs, it might be useful for A/S Welch or others meet with him to have a brief, quiet side meeting to discuss possible MEPP dynamics. End Comment.

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